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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8187
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5431
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2661
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA 0625
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 2833
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3547
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4740
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002020

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: LA PAZ "UNITY" DEMONSTRATION

REF: A. LA PAZ 2008

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1981

Classified By: Ambassador Philip Goldberg for reasons 1.4 b, d

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Local press and opinion makers are touting the July 20th demonstration (cabildo) in El Alto as a complete success. Logistically the event was a success, with no violence and only a few minor injuries. Numerically the event was a success: over a million people attended, with some estimating as high as two million (all agree this was the largest public gathering in Bolivia's history.) Questions remain as to whether the event will cause more division within Bolivia, despite the stated message of unity. End summary.

Mixed Messages: Unity vs. La Paz Power

[1](#)2. (C) Although the majority of flags in the crowd were the Bolivian tri-color national flag (unlike Santa Cruz marches where the departmental flag dominates), the message of unity was often lost. Seven of the nine speakers delivered divisive discourses (castigating "bad Bolivians" in Sucre, threatening violence, and citing the anger of El Alto, for example.) In addition, the organizers of the cabildo issued a demand that the Constituent Assembly drop the issue of moving the capital by August 6th (or face an indefinite strike in La Paz department.) Two moderate politicians who attempted to speak at the event (La Paz Mayor Juan del Granado and La Paz Prefect Jose Luis Paredes) were prevented from having an official presence and National Unity party leader Samuel Doria Medina was blocked from the speakers' platform by whip-bearing red ponchos (ref A). Many observers see this gathering as a tit-for-tat response to the Santa Cruz cabildo in December 2006 which boasted a million participants. Sucre is now planning its own cabildo for July [1](#)25.

El Alto the Real Seat of Power

¶3. (C) Residents of the city of La Paz did participate in the cabildo (even from the wealthy Southern Zone); however, the fact that the cabildo physically took place in El Alto and that the majority of participants were from El Alto highlighted the true source of power for this event. Although President Morales maintained his distance from the cabildo, he draws his support from the Altiplano and, more specifically, from El Alto (where his approval rating is consistently over 80 percent.) While the cabildo was ostensibly organized to highlight the power of La Paz, for the rest of the country it will likely re-emphasize that, although decrees may come from La Paz, they are backed by the citizens of El Alto, who can be mobilized en masse and who can be expected to take to the streets in support of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party as needed.

Do Not Take Away My Livelihood

¶4. (C) Part of the large turnout can be attributed to the personal economic stake pacenos (residents of La Paz) and altenos (residents of El Alto) have in keeping the capital in La Paz. The obvious concern over the potential change of capitals for many participants is a question of employment. A large portion of the population draws employment from the presence of the national government. Much of the public argument against moving the capital has centered solely around how badly such a move would affect the economy of the area.

Comment

¶5. (C) Although the cabildo participants were well within their rights to protest against the possible movement of the capital, the event was more power-play than protest. The cabildo will be seen as an "us against them" statement, a display of Altiplano indigenous power trying to impose itself over the entire country. President Morales' recent statements that the Constituent Assembly should not debate the question of the capital's relocation emphasize his links to the cabildo participants and may further alienate Bolivian citizens in other parts of the country. By pitting the Altiplano against Sucre, the cabildo has left the department of Chuquisaca (where Sucre is located) with little choice but to align itself with the autonomy-seeking departments of the media luna (ref B.) Despite the lip-service to unity, the cabildo may serve more to divide Bolivia along geographic lines. End comment.

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